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The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle

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Among the gifts of silk presented in 1603 by the Safavid ruler Shah ʿAbbas (r. 1587–1629) to the Venetian Doge Marino Grimani (r. 1595–1606) was a large gold-embroidered velvet, a fragment of which is still preserved at the Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo (*plate 1*).[1] In an intricate repeating pattern, it features the Madonna and Child being waited upon by an attendant in an open landscape, following the Qur'an's description of Jesus' birth rather than the Biblical version.[2] The Virgin sits cross-legged, in a pose widely understood to connote royalty in Islamic portraiture. Both mother and child appear with their heads encircled by golden flames, in a manner typical of depictions of the Prophet Muhammad and other holy figures in contemporary Islamic manuscript painting.[3] But at the same time, Mary is shown with a single, awkwardly exposed breast as she nurses her child. Although similar depictions are rare in other surviving Islamic paintings of Mary, they are characteristic of European images of the same theme, suggesting that the artists who designed Shah ʿAbbas's special velvet for the doge were familiar with such representations.[4]

As a textile produced in an Islamic court as part of a diplomatic mission to the West, depicting a quintessentially Christian scene in a Qur'anic guise, and deploying visual imagery that combines painting traditions of Europe and Iran, the velvet Persian Madonna, as I will call it, stands as an excellent example of hybridity, mobility, and the agency of objects as cultural mediators. In recent years, many scholars have shown how the boundaries between Europe and the Islamic world were continually being transgressed, negotiated, and redefined during the early modern period by the circulation of objects across borders and the resulting intermingling of artistic idioms.[5] Such interests have been amplified by a more general turn to reconstructing the 'social biographies' of objects – which in the field of Islamic art has gone beyond the East–West divide to explore the lives of objects within multilinear and three-dimensional networks.[6]

While buillding on this scholarship, the present study seeks to introduce yet another level of meaning to the Persian Madonna, one that is rooted in the diplomatic, military, and above all economic moment of world history in which it was concieved. To do so, I turn to the specific raw material out of which it was crafted: silk. For the Persian Madonna, far from being presented in isolation, was but one of nine separate objects gifted to the Venetian doge in 1603, all of which were made of silk. Nor was this coincidental, for Shah ʿAbbas's innovative attempt to create a royal silk monopoly, and to use his control of silk exports to build a new commercial basis for his power, were both well known to contemporaries and the

Detail from Unknown maker(s), *The Safavid Cope*, early seventeenth century, (*plate 3*).

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1 Unknown maker(s), *Safavid Silk Velvet with a Repeated Pattern of Virgin Mary Nursing Jesus*, end of sixteenth to beginning of seventeenth century. 136 × 136 cm. Venice: Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo (Cl. xxii, n. 37). Photo: © Photo Archive, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.

subject of a great deal of recent historical research.[7] These efforts were inextricably linked to his motivations for sending an embassy to Venice, which, I argue, were twofold. First, ʿAbbas was hoping to form a military and diplomatic alliance against his archrival, the Ottoman sultan. Second, he was in search of new customers interested in buying high-quality Safavid silk directly from him. Establishing such trade partnerships required altering the established course of the silk route through Ottoman lands, thereby eliminating the intermediary role of Ottoman merchants.

Taking Shah ʿAbbas's gifts of silk to Venice as its starting point, this essay considers Safavid embassies to Europe and suggests new ways of thinking about them that go beyond the movement of courtly objects across cultural and religious boundaries. By placing custom-made gifts, such as the Persian Madonna, in a triangular network of diplomatic and commercial exchange, I argue that ʿAbbas was setting in motion objects that oscillated between the categories of gift and commodity.[8] On the one hand, the gifting of an object such as the Persian Madonna

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necessarily operated within well-established Perso-Islamic and Safavid discourses of gifting and economic redistribution, as well as the wider contemporary practices of cross-cultural encounter and interaction.[9] Deeply rooted in Marcel Mauss's 'system of total presentations', such acts of giving concurrently concealed self-interest and revealed shifting notions of power and dominance.[10] Yet the fact that the objects given on this occasion were exclusively made of silk, the Safavid trade commodity par excellence, represented a significant departure from earlier established norms of courtly exchange – and hinted at an entirely different regime of exchange based on transitory market goods made to order and sold for profit.[11] As such, the 1603 embassy constituted a highly creative gesture on the part of the shah, which played upon the ambiguities inherent in gift-giving in a way that was made possible only by the emergence of a global system of commodity exchange at this precise moment in history. If mobility is understood as a purposive act rather than circumstantial movement, then ʿAbbas set in motion a group of objects that were specifically designed to highlight this potential for transformation from gift to commodity.

Gifts between Rival Empires

A few months after the arrival of Shah ʿAbbas's gifts to Doge Grimani in 1603, ʿAbbas declared war on the neighbouring Ottomans. Even though the ongoing Ottoman–

2 Seyyid Lokman, *Shah Tahmasp's Accession Gifts Being Displayed before Sultan Murad III in 1576*, from *Şehinşehnāme* F.1404, 41b–42a, 1581. Manuscript illumination. Istanbul: Istanbul University Library. Photo: Istanbul University Library.

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Safavid conflict stemmed primarily from control over territories and political influence, sectarian disputes often overshadowed these disagreements.[12] As a result, during the sixteenth century, relations between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiʿi Safavids were punctuated by alternating periods of war and peace, which brought them in continual contact and occasioned the exchange of many economically valuable and culturally significant gifts.[13] Such ceremonial encounters have frequently been depicted in Ottoman official dynastic histories, which portray dazzling Safavid gifts as manifestations of the shah's subservience before the religiously self-righteous and militarily invincible Ottoman sultan. For example, in a double-page miniature painting from the Book of the King of Kings (*Şehinşehnāme*), gifts from the Safavid Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–76) are presented to the Ottoman Sultan Murad III (r. 1574–95) in a highly formal setting at Topkapı Palace on the occasion of the latter's accession (*plate* 2).[14] The shah's ambassador is held by his arms and forced to bow down before the sultan, who majestically sits in a high throne at the top right. The gifts occupy a large section of the composition. They are held by Ottoman gatekeepers, who display them in an orderly fashion. Some of the Safavid gifts are discernible in the painting, such as manuscripts, bird feathers, textiles, carpets, and disassembled pieces of a large tent. The accompanying text describes these objects as 'heart-cheering', 'beautiful', and 'pleasant', reflecting their acceptance and admiration at the Ottoman court.

Shah ʿAbbas's gifts to Ottoman sultans in the early years of his reign similarly complied with tradition, in so far as he intended for their unique, diverse, and historically charged character to signal subservience and humility. For example, we learn from Venetian archival documents that the shah's accession gifts for the Ottoman sultan Mehmed III (r. 1595–1612) presented in 1597 included two exceptional copies of the Qur'an, seven bound volumes of Persian poetry, gold-woven textiles, a large velvet tent, antidotes, velvet carpets, ceremonial bows and arrows, and rare horses.[15] However, Shah ʿAbbas's active search for political and commercial allies in Europe at the turn of the seventeenth century coincided with his subsequent refusal to comply with established norms of courtly etiquette in his gifts to the Ottoman sultan. After 1597, never again did the shah send Constantinople an embassy bearing a comparable selection of gifts.

Shah ʿAbbas's Silk

In 1587, ʿAbbas inherited a devastated state. During the first decade of his rule, the new shah suppressed internal revolts, subdued oppositions to his rule, moved his capital further away from the Ottoman border to Isfahan, and established a permanent standing army.[16] As the growing power and military advancements of the Safavid army continued to alarm the Ottomans, ʿAbbas harmonized his military, political, and religious ambitions with commercial ones, primarily by establishing a state monopoly on foreign trade.[17] The shah took under his control the trade of countless commodities, and silk took pride of place among these.[18] Alongside building an infrastructure for the production and distribution of silk, ʿAbbas arranged the forced migration of Armenian merchants – the primary exporters of Iran's international silk trade – from Julfa in Azarbaijan to New Julfa in Isfahan.[19]

In 1603, Shah ʿAbbas declared war on the Ottomans. At the same time, he set out to create an international network of silk trading that bypassed his western neighbour, suggesting a new conception of royal power that entailed control over not only territories, but also trade routes and the movement of things.[20] In the early seventeenth century, silk proved to be a key item within Ottoman–Safavid

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3 Unknown maker(s), *The Safavid Cope*, early seventeenth century. Silk with silver and gold thread (in three pieces), height 122.8 cm. London: Victoria and Albert Museum (477-1894, T.30-1926, T.211-1930). Photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

rivalry that involved more contenders than these two courts. During this period, Shah ʿAbbas sent loads of high-quality Persian silk as diplomatic gifts to various European rulers,[21] asking for political and military alliance against the Ottoman sultan, and anticipating direct purchases of silk to be exported by sea.[22] As embassies between Iran and Europe continued to be exchanged, Shah ʿAbbas used gifts creatively and strategically, tailoring them to his specific audiences, in order to incite curiosity and consumer desire.

A Persian Madonna and Child

In 1600, a small Safavid embassy arrived in Venice bearing letters of friendship, as well as an unusual custom-made gift from Shah ʿAbbas to Doge Marino Grimani: 'a gold-woven velvet fabric featuring the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin by the Angel Gabriel'.[23] Measuring approximately 4 by 4.5 metres, the scene of the Annunciation on this gold and silver woven textile was repeated sixteen times.[24] Even though this unique gift has not survived to this day, a rare example now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London depicting the same theme might give us an idea of what this Safavid Annunciation looked like (*plate* 3 and *plate* 4). The object in question is an Armenian cope (*shourdjar*), or a liturgical vestment in the shape of a semi-circular cloak.[25] Images of the Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary facing each other are embroidered on the front, on either side of the cope, to be positioned on the wearer's chest. The rest of the fabric features scrolling vines with stylized flowers, feathery and split leaves, and palmettes and lotuses executed in mirror image to fall on either side of a large image of the Crucifixion meant to be placed on the wearer's back. The depiction of Gabriel and Mary (*plate* 4) is typical of Safavid male and female figures across media, from textiles to manuscript paintings. At the same time, Mary's pose, with her face tilted slighty downward, and the crossing of her hand in front of her in a gesture of humility, suggest that the artists were familiar with iconographical conventions of this scene in Christian contexts in Europe.[26]

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4 Detail from Unknown maker(s), *The Safavid Cope*, early seventeenth century.

The velvet sent by Shah ʿAbbas must have been greatly admired, for it was later hung in the Hall of the Council of Ten (*Sala del Consiglio dei Dieci*) at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice. As he presented this gift, the Safavid ambassador Asad Beg relayed to the doge the shah's wish for reciprocal commerce between the two states. A merchant himself, Asad Beg explained that he had come to sell goods sent by the shah and to buy other items on his behalf. Meanwhile, in his letter, ʿAbbas repeatedly pointed out the old and sincere friendship between Persia and Venice. More significantly, ʿAbbas asked for two specific favours from the doge: to have Persian textiles of various colours dyed in Venice in the Persian style, and to assign two brokers in Venice who would be able to sell those textiles and buy other goods in his name.[27] The shah's request was received favourably, as is recorded in letters written back to him.

Perhaps the most memorable of all of Shah ʿAbbas's embassies to Europe is one that arrived in Venice months before the outbreak of the Ottoman–Safavid war in 1603. A well-known painting by Gabriele Caliari, which is still in the Palazzo Ducale, depicts the moment when the Safavid ambassador Fathi Beg presented the shah's gifts (*plate* 5).[28] According to Venetian archival records, Shah ʿAbbas's splendid gifts included a silk gold-embroidered mantle (*manto*), a silk velvet carpet woven with gold and silver threads,[29] 'a gold-embroidered velvet fabric with the figures of Christ and his mother Mary', and six other luxury textiles.[30]

The gold-embroidered velvet, which I have termed 'the Persian Madonna', is of particular interest (see *plate* 1). Currently measuring 136 cm all around, it features a repeat pattern of the Virgin Mary nursing Jesus in a landscape.[31] Mary is seated cross-legged on the ground, and Jesus lies on her lap, leaning on one of her legs. Both the mother's and the child's heads, as noted earlier, are encircled by pointed concentric flaming haloes, which distinguishes them from the standing attendant by their side, who holds a thick folded piece of fabric. The scene is framed on both

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sides by branching bushes with flowers. As Gauvin Bailey has pointed out, these shrubs might reference the palm tree in the Islamic tradition associated with the Nativity.[32] Though a recognizable palm tree is absent, other visual elements in the scene support this point. In the Qur'an, the chapter on Mary relates the birth of Jesus as follows:

> And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree: She cried (in her anguish): 'Ah! Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!' But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): 'Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee. And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee.'[33]

Indeed, in the velvet fabric, there is a pond by Mary's feet in which fish swim. Since according to the Qur'anic version of the story, Mary was alone when she gave birth, the attendant might be intended to represent an angelic being whose voice calms Mary by telling her about the stream and the palm tree.

The overall texture of the velvet, its pastel colour scheme, and numerous aspects of the landscape surrounding its protagonists – including the rendition of the vegetation, the bushes, the hovering bird, and the stylized flowers sprouting from delicate branches – conform with the easily recognizable visual language of Safavid high fashion during the reign of Shah ʿAbbas. The textile is a fascinating example of a hybrid object that transcends the two cultures between which it moved. At the same time, as a gift, it carried a specific meaning and constituted the

5 Gabriele Caliari, *Doge Marino Grimani Receiving the Gifts Presented by the Persian Ambassador in 1603*. Oil on canvas, 367 × 527 cm. Venice: Sala delle Quattre Porte, Palazzo Ducale. Photo: © Photo Archive, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.

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sort of relationship that Shah ʿAbbas wanted to forge with a European power like the Venetian Republic against the Ottomans.[34] In contrast to earlier Safavid gifts to the Ottoman court, which typically included a large variety of objects with high monetary, cultural, and historical value, Shah ʿAbbas's gifts to the doge were a small selection of luxury objects, all of which epitomized and promoted the visual, tactile, and technical possibilities that Shah ʿAbbas's silk network could offer. The silk velvet vividly captures this point with power and eloquence, as it presents a fundamentally Christian theme from a uniquely Safavid point of view. This way, the fabric could communicate two important messages simultaneously. First, it

6 Anthony van Dyck, *Robert Sherley*, 1622. Oil on canvas, 200 × 133.4 cm. Petworth: National Trust (acc. no 38). Photo: © National Trust Photo Library.

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displayed to its audience that designers and artists working for the shah could offer Christian-themed silks to Venetian (or Catholic) clients. Second, such a gift from a powerful Muslim ruler underscored his difference from the Ottoman sultan, and conveyed the idea that ʿAbbas was acutely aware of the doge's cultural identity and respected it. Precisely because this was a royal gift and not a trade sample, however, its gifting stressed this latter message more forcefully, making its double-sided message ambiguous.

The Safavid ambassador Fathi Beg's account of his reception by the doge underscores the care with which the shah had prepared the gifts, even going so far as to tend to their presentation. During the ceremony, Fathi Beg claimed, he explained to the doge that the mantle was specially produced for him and that it was made in one single piece, without any stitching. The shah had wished the doge to take it as a sign of his friendship and hoped that he would wear it thinking of him.[35] For the silk carpet, Fathi Beg relayed that 'my king, having understood that every year the Treasury of San Marco is put on display, as is very famous around the world, sent this carpet, which is of the highest quality produced in Persia, so that every time the treasury is displayed, this beautiful carpet will also be put on view.' And, he added: 'the velvet with the figures of Christ and Mary, the king [Shah ʿAbbas] sends to be displayed at the Church of San Marco.'[36] The doge thanked the shah for his kindness and sent gifts in return whose value amounted to 3,360 ducats. These presents comprised a gold-plated bowl engraved with figures, two silver flasks studded with glass, a full body mail, and four archebuses (handguns) decorated on one end with gold and studded with pearls. Along with such exchanges of gifts and letters expressing friendship, Persian embassies to Europe engaged in direct commercial transactions. Accordingly, prior to his departure, Fathi Beg purchased tens of body mail and weapons among other things.

The future possibilities proposed by this embassy markedly disturbed the Ottomans when they heard about it. By the time the ambassador reached Syria on his way back to Persia, the Ottoman–Safavid war had already begun. Ottoman authorities in Aleppo confiscated all of the items purchased by Fathi Beg in Venice, together with Grimani's gifts for ʿAbbas.

During the Ottoman–Safavid war, Shah ʿAbbas proved extremely successful in military terms, recovering almost all the territories he had lost in 1590, including the major centres of silk production. Nevertheless, the lack of a concrete promise from Europe for collective political support, combined with the signing of the Ottoman–Habsburg peace treaty in 1606, prompted him to be more aggressive in his quest for diverting the silk route from Anatolia. A Safavid mission sent to Spain in 1608, for example, directly expressed this idea to Philip III. Robert Sherley, the Englishman who spearheaded ʿAbbas's second wave of diplomatic overtures to Europe (between 1608 and 1615, and again between 1617 and 1622), led the embassy. Upon his arrival in Spain, Sherley explained to Phillip III that if he sent ships to Goa on the western coast of India and Hormuz in the Persian Gulf twice a year, both sides would benefit immensely and also inflict a heavy blow to the Ottoman economy. Another embassy to Portugal travelled around the Cape of Good Hope to reach Lisbon, in order to demonstrate the feasibility of alternative routes in carrying silk.

These and other embassies from Shah ʿAbbas resulted neither in long-term commercial contacts nor in anticipated political alliances against a common enemy. But the rich corpus of written and visual records documenting these contacts represents the unique nature of ʿAbbas's embassies. Even though the embassies failed

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in their political and economic mission, their material remains attest to the specific visual methods by which ʿAbbas sought to promote Safavid silk.

Consider, for example, the silk cloak worn by Robert Sherley in a life-size portrait by Anthony van Dyck from 1622 (*plate 6*).[37] Sherley appears as someone of the highest rank at the Safavid court. He wears a gold woven silk velvet cloak decorated with spiralling vines, which intersect at large lotuses. On the curling vines are also stylized flowers, as well as repeated reclining female figures holding wine bottles. Images of single and group figures of courtiers holding wine cups and bottles had long been a popular Safavid visual motif. Yet the female figures on the cloak in van Dyck's

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Des kindts Hoffmeister ders aus persithia Hatt gen Constantinopll
bracht, Ist im darnach Von seinem kënig der kopff abge-
schlagen Worden das er das kindt Nicht Hatt Wider
gebracht

***7 The Safavid Ambassador Entering Constantinople alongside an Ottoman Official in 1590*, from Codex Vindobonensis 8626, 125a, c. 1586–91. Album commissioned by Bartholomaus von Pezzen. Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. Photo: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Wien.**

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8 Detail from *The Safavid Ambassador Entering Constantinople alongside an Ottoman Official in 1590*, from Codex Vindobonensis 8626, 125a, c. 1586–91.

painting seem to draw on European models rather than Safavid ones.[38] This might be read as a strategic artistic choice to appeal to the cloak's European audience. The use of pale colours and the large blooms are unmistakable novelties pioneered in Safavid textile designs under Shah ʿAbbas's reign.

While ʿAbbas's gifts to the doge likewise embodied the highest quality of Safavid silk production, they also made a calculated effort to appeal to the receiver's taste and religious orientation. They were personal, custom-made gifts that were meant to underscore expressions of love and friendship in ʿAbbas's letters. The silk cloak worn by Sherley, on the other hand, speaks to Safavid trends and technological achievement that postdated the 1603 embassy to Venice. If this garment indeed reflects the kinds of silks that Shah ʿAbbas sent to European courts as diplomatic gifts during the 1610s and 1620s, then it requires a specific reading within the context of the more aggressive and assertive stance adopted by ʿAbbas against the Ottomans during this period.

ʿAbbas, in my view, was pointedly attempting to attack the Ottoman economy by proposing trade partnerships with European powers, just as he was entering into military conflict with the Ottomans themselves. The exchange and consumption of such distinctively Safavid garments, and their anticipated popularity in Europe, would have moreover assaulted the Ottomans on a symbolic level, for the Ottoman elite would never wear garments with wine-toting women or any such figural imagery. A painting from an Austrian album depicting a Safavid and an Ottoman official side by side in 1590 supports this point (*plate 7*). One of the most discernable differences between the Ottoman and Safavid courtiers is the latter's robe, decorated boldly with human figures (*plate 8*).[39]

From 'heart-cheering gifts' to 'strange presents'

During the first years of the Ottoman–Safavid war of 1603–12, the Ottomans were simultaneously at war with the Habsburgs and were dealing with widespread rebellions all over Anatolia. Soon after the 1606 peace with the Habsburgs, these other rebellions were also subdued, and the Ottomans were ready to confront the Safavid shah head

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on. After some additional years of fighting, ʿAbbas made a peace offer that was received favourably by the sultan. A Safavid ambassador reached Constantinople in 1612 bearing many unusual gifts, among which were 200 bales of silk, and 400 animals including camels and horses.[40] According to the agreement, borders would be the same as those indicated in the first Ottoman–Safavid peace treaty, signed between Sultan Süleyman and Shah Tahmasp in 1555.[41] Having felt the bitter consequences of the silk embargo Shah ʿAbbas had launched against the Ottomans, the sultan had additionally asked to receive a yearly tribute of 200 bales of silk as compensation for all the territories from where the Ottoman army had to withdraw.[42] Nevertheless, Shah ʿAbbas refused to send such a tribute, which was the main reason for the renewal of war after three years.[43] Meanwhile, ʿAbbas was in communication with British officials discussing a plan that would in fact hurt the Ottoman market, whereby the East India Company would trade Persian silk. Philip III of Spain (r. 1598–1621), who wanted the shah to conclude neither a trade deal with the British nor a peace treaty with the Ottomans, dispatched an embassy to Isfahan.[44] But by that time the Ottoman army had come dangerously close to the Safavid shrine city of Ardabil, and ʿAbbas was forced to give in to the demands of the Ottomans and pay the reduced amount of 100 bales of silk plus an equal amount of unspecified gifts to the sultan every year.[45]

The embassy bringing these gifts/tributes is pictured in Nādirī's *Şehnāme*, an Ottoman illustrated dynastic history about the short reign of the sultan Osman II (r. 1618–22, *plate 9*). The portrayal of Safavid gifts here departs significantly from the visual and textual conventions established in sixteenth-century versions of this same

9 Ganizade Nadiri, *Safavid Embassy Approaching the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul with Gifts from Shah Abbas in 1618*, from *Şehname-i Nadiri* H. 1124, 24b–25a, c. 1622. Manuscript illumination. Istanbul: Topkapı Palace Library. Photo: Topkapı Palace Library.

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genre of luxury books (see *plate* 2). Rather than objects of subservience exhibited before the sultan, Nādirī's's painting illustrates ʿAbbas's new gifts being transported to the Topkapı Palace. By highlighting the gifts' transfer rather than their ceremonial presentation, the image shifts the emphasis from ceremonial display to commercial transaction. In the painting, the Safavid ambassador Tohta Beg is seen on horseback, led by Ottoman officials as they all approach the Topkapı Palace. Behind, we see camels with the promised silk on their backs, two elephants, a rhinoceros and a caged tiger.[46] The text emphasizes the wonder that these gifts elicited in Istanbul, and collectively describes them as 'strange presents'.[47]

During the reign of Shah ʿAbbas, the nature and agency of objects exchanged as gifts between his court, its western neighbour, and Europe underwent dramatic change. In highlighting their potential to move quickly from being gifts to commodities, ʿAbbas's gifts were imbued with visual references to their turn-of-the-century Safavid identity. This made them inalienable, by making a double reference to their past and their potential future as commodities.[48] As custom-made objects for the Venetian doge, their subject matter and iconography also bespoke a special effort to appeal to the taste and cultural profile of their receiver. More significantly, the relations that these objects formed and the reactions they incited were not limited to the two parties they were exchanged between. The movement of these gifts, and the commodities appropriated from them in the early decades of the seventeenth century, directly involved the Ottomans. By 1618, they provoked the Ottomans to transform their attitude towards the Safavids in an object-bound manner. Within an internationally connected trade network, what came to define Ottoman victory over the Safavids, rather than ideological domination or military conquest, was expressed in their power to receive a commodity – silk – as a gift.

Notes

1 This velvet was most recently shown at the 2013–14 exhibition about Shah ʿAbbas's gifts to Venice at the Palazzo Ducale. See Elisa Gagliardi Mangilli, ed., *I doni di Shah Abbas* il *Grande alla Serenissima*, exh. cat., Venice, 2013.

2 See below for a more detailed discussion of how the image references the Islamic tradition.

3 Christiane Gruber, 'Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic painting', *Muqarnas*, 26, 2009, 229–62.

4 The nursing Madonna (or *Virgo lactans*) images became popular in the fourteenth century. In earlier images of this type (as in the Safavid silk), only one breast is shown and emphasized, often appearing as a sack awkwardly attached to the chest. See Megan Holmes, 'Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna lactans in fifteenth-century Florentine art', in Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, eds, *Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, Cambridge, 1997, 167–95; Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350–1750*, Berkeley, CA, 2008.

5 See most recently (and for a bibliography) Gülru Necipoğlu, 'Visual cosmopolitanism and creative translation: Artistic conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople', *Muqarnas*, 29, 2012, 1–81.

6 Avinoam Shalem, 'Histories of belonging and George Kubler's Prime Object', *Getty Research Journal*, 3, 2011, 1–14; more generally see Linda Komaroff, ed., *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts*, Los Angeles, CA, 2011.

7 See for example, Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart*, Washington, DC, 1987; Patricia Baker, *Islamic Textiles*, London, 1995; Willem Floor, *The Persian Textile Industry in Historical Perspective, 1500–1925*, Paris, 1999; Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver: The Eurasian Trade of the Julfa Armenians in Safavid Iran and India (1530–1750)*, Atlanta, GA, 1999; Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600–1730*, Cambridge, 1999, 69–74; and Jon Thompson *et al.*, eds, *Carpets and Textiles in the Iranian World, 1400–1700*, London, 2010.

8 In a Marxist reading of Mauss, Chris Gregory conceived of gifts and commodities as diametrically opposed, arguing that commodity exchange creates relations between objects, whereas gift exchange creates relations between subjects exchanging them. C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, London, 1982. My approach is inspired by Arjun Appadurai, who instead proposed looking closely into the social life of things. For Appadurai, a commodity 'is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things'. Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value', in Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, 1986, 17.

9 Fahmida Suleman, 'Gifts and gift giving', in Josef W. Meri, ed., *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, New York, 2006, 295–6; Rudi P. Matthee, 'Gift giving iv. In the Safavid Period', in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, New York, 2001, 10: 609–14.

10 According to Mauss, gifts are at once free and binding; they are both disinterested and self-serving. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, New York, 1990. Building on Mauss's cyclical conception of gift exchange, Bourdieu underscores the dynamics of calculation involved in the circulation of both gifts and commodities. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Selections from *The Logic of Practice*', in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift, New York and London, 1997, 204–15.

11 Until the end of the sixteenth century, one of the most important indexes for the prestige of Safavid courtly gifts was the number and variety of different kinds of gifts and different materials of varied origins out of which they were assembled. See Sinem Arcak, 'Gifts in motion: Ottoman–Safavid cultural exchange, 1501–1618', PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2012.

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12 Sunni Orthodox Ottoman sultans frequently denounced the Twelver Shiʿi Safavid shahs as heretics. Ottoman jurists persuaded the army to fight a Muslim enemy by issuing fatwas that defined campaigns on Safavid lands as holy war. In their correspondence, Ottoman sultans ridiculed Safavid shahs' claim to Islamic rulership by pointing out their failure to build mosques. Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton, NJ, 2005, 47–70; Colin Imber, *Ebu's-Su'ud: The Islamic Legal Tradition*, Stanford, CA, 1997, 74, 85–6.

13 For recent overviews of Ottoman–Safavid relations, see Max Scherberger, 'The confrontation between Sunni and Shiʿi empires: Ottoman–Safavid relations between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century', in Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, eds, *The Sunna and Shiʿa in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*, Basingstoke, 2011, 51–68; Ernest Tucker, 'From rhetoric of war to realities of peace: The evolution of Ottoman–Iranian diplomacy through the Safavid era', in Willem Floor and Edmund Herzig, eds, *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age*, London, 2012, 71–90.

14 This is the first volume of the two-volume manuscript covering the reign of Murad III. For this manuscript and a bibliography, see Emine Fetvacı, *Picturing History at the Ottoman Court*, Bloomington, IN, 2013.

15 These are recorded in a report written by the contemporary Venetian ambassadors to Constantinople. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASVe), Senato, Copie ottocenteschi dei dispacci, Registro XI, 253. In this instance, ʿAbbas unmistakably took his cue from the norms of gift-giving established by his grandfather Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–76). In terms of variety, number, and quality of each type of object, these were similar to Tahmasp's accession gifts for the previous two sultans in 1568 and 1576. Arcak, *Gifts in Motion*.

16 For his reforms, see Sussan Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces: Statecraft, Shiʿism and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran*, Edinburgh, 2008; Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran*, Cambridge, MA, 2003; Babaie *et al.*, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran*, London and New York, 2004; Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*, Cambridge, 1980.

17 Vladimir Minorsky marks Shah ʿAbbas's control of silk trade as a milestone making the leap from feudalism to capitalism in Iran; he conceives of the shah as a capitalist. Vladimir Minorsky, trans. and ed., *Tadhkirat Al-Muluk: A Manual of Safavid Administration (circa 1137/1725)*, London, 1943, 14. On mercantilism and ʿAbbas, see also Matthee, *Politics of Trade*, 69–74.

18 Linda K. Steinmann, 'Shah ʿAbbas and the Royal Silk Trade 1599–1629', *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, 14: 1, 1987, 68–74; see also Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, Chicago, IL, 1974.

19 The wealthy Armenian community then facilitated the exchange of Persian silk for European silver. Edmund Herzig, 'The rise of the Julfa merchants in the late sixteenth century', in Charles Melville, ed., *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, London, 1996, 305–22; Baghdiantz McCabe, *The Shah's Silk*; Matthee, *Politics of Trade*, 84–90.

20 On Ottoman soil, the city of Bursa in northwest Anatolia was the major centre of silk production and a major outlet of Iranian silk for European merchants. For Bursa and silk in the Ottoman economy, see Halil Inalcık and Donald Quataert, eds, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914*, Cambridge, 1994.

21 Marianna Shreve Simpson, 'The Morgan Bible and the giving of religious gifts between Iran and Europe/Europe and Iran during the Reign of Shah ʿAbbas I', in Colum Hourihane, ed., *Between the Picture and the Word: Manuscript Studies from the Index of Christian Art*, Princeton, NJ, 2005, 141–50.

22 In his letters to European powers, ʿAbbas frequently pointed out the effectiveness of moving silk to Europe through Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and even around the Cape of Good Hope, rather than the traditional routes that passed through Aleppo, Bursa, and Izmir, which were under Ottoman rule.

23 '… un panno tessuto d'oro, et veludo a figure della Beata Vergine Anuntiata dall'Angelo Gabriele'. ASVe, Collegio, Esposizioni Principi, Registro 14. Quoted in Rodolfo Gallo, *Il Tesoro di S. Marco e la Sua Storia*, Venice and Rome, 1967, 260–1. For this Safavid velvet and the embassy, see also Guglielmo Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, Turin, 1865, 43; Giorgio Rota, *Under Two Lions: On the Knowledge of Persia in the Republic of Venice (ca. 1450–1797)*, Vienna, 2009, 19. For an overview of Shah ʿAbbas's gifts to Venice in the early seventeenth century, see Elisa Gagliardi Mangilli, 'Mai a mani nude! Il traffico delle Regalie. Itinerari', in Mangilli, *I doni di Shah Abbas*, 57–69.

24 See Gallo, *Tesoro di S. Marco*, 261.

25 Vrej Nersessian, 'The Marcy-Indjoudjian Cope', *Ars Orientalis*, 40, 2011, 204–41.

26 Most likely, these were Armenian artists commissioned by ʿAbbas as in the case of the V&A textile. Nersessian, 'The Marcy–Indjoudjian Cope'.

27 A document outlining the verbal testimony of the ambassador and a translation of the shah's letter is given in Berchet, *Venezia e la Persia*, 192–3.

28 Alberto Rizzi, 'Il ricevimento dell'ambasceria persiana di Gabriele Caliari', *Quaderni della Soprintendenza ai beni artistici e storici di Venezia*, 8, 1979, 121–9; Camillo Tonini, 'I doni degli ambasciatori Persiani alla Serenissima nella tela di Gabriele Caliari', in Mangilli, *I doni di Shah Abbas*, 28–9. Some of the objects that Fathi Beg delivered to the doge on this occasion are still extant.

29 This carpet is at the treasury of San Marco in Venice (Basilica di San Marco, inv. n.26). See Curatola, *Eredità dell'Islam*, cat. 277, 431–2; Carboni, *Venezia e L'Islam*, cat. 66, 188, 339.

30 '… un panno di velluto tessuto in oro, con figure di Cristo et di sua madre Maria'. Berchet, *Venezia e la Persia*, 197.

31 The original must have been larger, about three times its current size, for when the ambassador Fathi Beg was presenting it to Doge Grimani, he explained that it measured four metres (*sette braccia*). Berchet, *Venezia e la Persia*, 46. According to Rodolfo Gallo, based on the records for the treasury of San Marco it was 4.5 metres, and the figures of Mary and Jesus were repeated fourteen times. In the current textile, however, the full scene is repeated only four times. Gallo, *Tesoro di S. Marco*, 261.

32 Gauvin A. Bailey, 'In the manner of the Frankish masters: A Safavid drawing and its Flemish inspiration', *Oriental Art*, 40: 4, Winter 1994/95, 33.

33 Qur'an, 19:23–5. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *An English Interpretation of the Holy Quran with Full Arabic Text*, Lahore, 1995, 458.

34 Establishing an alliance with Venice was particularly important for ʿAbbas, since the commercial relationship between Venice and the Ottoman Empire generated significant economic activity. Venice was a major centre of importation of luxury textiles, cottons and carpets originating or passing through Ottoman lands. Furthermore, raw silk from the East was one of the base materials that fed local weaving industries in Venice.

35 Berchet, *Venezia e la Persia*, 45.

36 'Questo, disse il persiano, è dei più belli tappeti che si facciano. Il mio re avendo inteso che ogni anno si mette fuori il Tesoro di S. Marco, tanto famoso per tutto il mondo, lo manda alla Serenità Vostra, perchè si contenti ordinare che ogni volta che si esporrà il tesoro sia esso esposto sopra questo tappeto per la sua gran bellezza. E questo, disse il persiano, il re manda perchè sia presentato alla chiesa di S. Marco.' Quoted in Berchet, *Venezia e la Persia*, 45–6.

37 This is actually one of two well-known portraits of Sherley. For these, see Sheila Canby, *Shah ʿAbbas: The Remaking of Iran*, exh. cat., London, 2009, 56. See also Patricia Baker, 'Wrought of gold and silver: Honorific garments in seventeenth century Iran', in Thompson *et al.*, *Carpets and Textiles*, 161–2.

38 In reference to the metaphor of the cypress tree for the beloved in classical Persian love poetry, Safavid examples of this motif usually show a courtier holding a wine cup or a wine bottle as a tall slender figure, standing upright. For sixteenth-century examples, see Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul*, 139.
Even though this is a painting of a Safavid cloak rather than the fabric itself, there are other extant examples of Safavid luxury textiles that are in direct iconographic and thematic conversation with European models. See for example, Mary Anderson McWilliams, 'Allegories unveiled: European sources for a Safavid velvet', in *Textiles in Trade: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium September 14–16,*

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1990, *Washington, D.C.*, Los Angeles, CA, 1990, 136–48; Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul*, 140–1; Friedrich Spuhler, *Islamic Carpets and Textiles in the Keir Collection*, London, 1978, 183–9.

39 For the creation of a distinctive Ottoman artistic canon that eliminated figural imagery, see Gülru Necipoğlu, 'A kanun for the state, a canon for the arts: Conceptualizing the classical synthesis of Ottoman art and architecture', in G. Veinstein, ed., *Soliman le Magnifique et son temps*, Paris, 1992, 159–77. For Safavid textiles with figural imagery, see Jennifer Scarce, 'The court dress of Safavid Iran in the sixteenth century: An interpretation of some textiles represented in contemporary illustration', in Thompson *et al.*, *Carpets and Textiles*, 143–57.

40 The Ottoman court chronicler Mustafa Safi gives the amount of the silk as '200 ass-loads' ('dü-vist ḫır-vār-ı harir'). Mustafa Safi, *Mustafa Sāfī'nin Zübdetü't-tevārīh'i*, ed. İbrahim Hakkı Çuhadar, 2 vols, Ankara, 2003, II: 142.

41 Jalāl al-Dīn Munajjim Yazdī, *Tārikh-i ʿAbbāsī yā Rūznāma-yi Mullā Jalāl*, ed. S. Vahid Niya (Tehran, 1366/1987), 427; Mustafa Safi, *Zübdetü't-tevārih*, II: 144.

42 Ottoman chroniclers concur that ʿAbbas agreed to sending 200 bales of silk every year with this treaty. Mustafa Safi, *Zübdetü't-tevārih*, II: 144; Peçevī, *Tārih-i Peçevī*, II: 340.

43 Naima, *Tārih-i Naʿīmā*, ed. Mehmet Ipşirli, 4 vols, Ankara, 2007, II: 421.

44 Matthee, *Politics of Trade*, 83.

45 'muʿayyen o miḳdār ipek her yıle / yanınca hedayā-yı bīḥad ile'. Nādirī, *Şehnāme*, Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Ahmed Paşa 280, 28a. The text of this manuscript has been transliterated in Numan Külekçi, 'Ganī-zāde Nādirī: Hayatı, Edebi Kişiliği, Eserleri, Dīvānı ve Şeh-nāmesi'nin Tenkidli Metni', PhD Dissertation, Atatürk Üniversitesi, 1985, 352.

46 Katip Çelebi's chronicle recorded these as: 'one hundred bales of silk and four elephants and one rhinoceros and some other gifts' ('yüz yük ipek ve dört fil ve bir gergedan ve baʿzı hedāyā'). Zeynep Aycibin, 'Katip Çelebi, Fezleke, Tahlil ve Metin', PhD Dissertation, Mimar Sinan Üniversitesi, 2007, 644.

47 'Garāyib hedāyası var cümleden / Getürdi nice pil ile gergedan'. Külekçi, 'Ganī-zāde Nādirī,' 352.

48 According to Annette Weiner, inalienable objects carry something of their previous owners: 'the object acts as a vehicle for bringing past time into the present, so that the histories of ancestors, titles, or mythological events become an intimate part of a person's present identity ... In its inalienability, the object must be seen as more than an economic resource and more than an affirmation of social resources'. Annette Weiner, 'Inalienable wealth', *American Ethnologist*, 12, 1985, 210.

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